RESEARCH NOTE

EXPLORING THE EFFECTS OF SINGLE-MEMBER DISTRICTS ON AN URBAN POLITICAL SYSTEM A Case Study Of Birmingham, Alabama

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The decision in *Yarbrough et al.* v. *City of Birmingham* in 1989 resulted in Birmingham, Alabama, changing its nine-member city council from at-large to district elections to preserve minority (white) representation. Implementation of this court order produced the descriptive representation it was designed to attain but did not improve citizen perceptions of the quality of representation. It produced other changes in the conduct of city politics. Council candidates altered their campaign strategies to make themselves appear more sensitive to district-level concerns. Districts do not yet seem to have stimulated either turnout or greater competition in council elections.

When the U.S. Supreme Court handed down the *Thornburg* v. *Gingles* (478 U.S. 30, 1986) decision, single-member districts (SMDs) drawn along racial lines became the standard remedy for underrepresentation of minorities in local government. Empirical analyses have confirmed that SMDs resulted in more blacks being elected to local office (Jones 1976; Karnig 1976; Robinson and Dye 1978; Taebel 1978; Karnig and Welch, 1982; Welch 1990). The data do not support a finding that SMDs did as well in assisting Hispanics

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into office (Lyons and Jewell 1988; Polinard, Wrinkle, and Longoria 1991; Taebel 1978; Zax 1990). Opposition to SMDs may stem from racism or a normative bias against allocating positions in government on the basis of descriptive categories. However, the history of racism that led to reliance on SMDs to remedy underrepresentation has the potential to politicize evaluation of other effects of SMDs. *Yarbrough et al.* v. City of Birmingham (1989, slip opinion), in which whites were the minority plaintiffs, offers a unique opportunity to analyze SMDs without the baggage of a hidden agenda confounding the discussion.

BIRMINGHAM POLITICS: A BRIEF HISTORY

In 1963, Birmingham adopted a nonpartisan mayor-council government. The mayor is chosen in citywide elections to serve four-year terms with unlimited succession. Council members were to be elected to four-year staggered terms. Every two years, five councillors were chosen; four would have four-year terms, but the fifth candidate, or the winner with the fewest votes, would serve a two-year term. Council members also have unlimited succession. Runoffs settled races when majorities did not emerge on the first ballot.

Richard Arrington and his political allies founded the Jefferson County Citizens Coalition (JCCC) in 1977. It quickly became the main vehicle for mobilizing black support for political candidates in Birmingham. In 1979, the JCCC propelled Arrington into the mayor's office and left whites with a 5-4 majority on the city council. The JCCC then began to practice a machine-style politics of inclusion by endorsing popular white incumbents. Throughout the 1980s, the rate of increase in JCCC endorsed councillors outpaced the increase in blacks elected to council. The first election producing a majority black council was held in 1985, but three of the four white office-holders served with the JCCC endorsement. Thus the JCCC had an 8-1 majority on council. The JCCC advanced further in 1987, changing the racial mix of council to a 6-3 black majority; but more important, it increased the JCCC-endorsed majority to 9-0. During this time, council candidates defined themselves largely in terms of allegiance or opposition to Arrington.

The dominant role of the JCCC blurs the definition of minority. Arrington and the JCCC-endorsed council candidates had always enjoyed a slice of white support (Frieden 1983), most of which came from residents of the city's south side who are generally more liberal than whites in other parts of the city. Moreover, the city's gay population is concentrated on the south side,

and Arrington had actively sought its support in the 1979 and 1983 elections (Bailey forthcoming). In Birmingham politics, minority could be defined in at least three ways: a racial minority formed by all whites, a racial minority composed of all nonblacks, or a political minority who oppose the JCCC.

The *Yarbrough* case arose in 1987 when Yarbrough, a white who had served on the council for 18 years, was defeated. White residents brought suit relying on the *Gingles* interpretation of the 1982 Amendments to the Voting Rights Act, which provided a three-pronged test to determine whether a multimember governing body dilutes minority voting strength. First, the minority group must be geographically compact so that it may be a majority group within at least one SMD. Second, the minority group must be politically cohesive. Third, the majority group must regularly vote to defeat candidates the minority group prefers (for a good discussion of these tests see Grofman, Handley, and Niemi 1992). The white residents argued that as a minority making up one-third of the population, they were entitled to one-third of the council seats. Arrington, who began his third term in office in 1987, had favored SMDs for years, as had many other local black leaders. With black and white politicians concurring favorably on SMDs, the federal district court issued a consent decree. The city created six black districts and three white districts. All councillors would be elected to serve concurrent 4-year terms beginning in 1989.

A fundamental difference between *Yarbrough* and other post-*Gingles* cases is that white minority plaintiffs sought to keep their representation on the council from falling below their proportion of the city population. Other decisions had addressed the issue of past minority underrepresentation. Therefore, SMDs in Birmingham may produce outcomes different from what have been observed elsewhere. The switch to SMDs may affect city politics in four ways. First, SMDs will produce six black city councillors and three white city councillors. If the third step of the *Gingles* test, consistent defeat of candidates preferred by the minority, is reversed, a second change may be greater satisfaction with the council among whites. Electing candidates of their choice should make them feel better represented (Grofman, Handley, and Niemi 1992). Third, district elections will cast the role of the councillors as delegates. Office seekers in at-large systems benefit from name recognition, endorsements, and their place in local coalitions (Lieske 1989). In contrast, winning candidates in a district election need to get acquainted with their constituents and try to ensure that the district voters realize that their interests are represented (Lorch 1995). Fourth, SMDs produce greater voter turnout than at-large systems (Judd and Swanstrom 1994). They also give challenger candidates a better chance at overcoming the name-recognition

advantage enjoyed by incumbents (Lorch 1995). Thus SMDs may make the electoral process more competitive. In short, SMDs can have more far-reaching effects than simply guaranteeing racial or ethnic mix on multimember boards.

EVALUATING SMDs WITH A WHITE MINORITY

First, the *Yarbrough* decision assured minority officeholding. Residential segregation facilitated drawing district lines to put blacks and whites in separate districts. In the foreseeable future, the white residents will likely remain in areas sufficiently geographically compact to preserve race-based districts. This case differs from other SMD plans. It did not place *more* minority (white) candidates on council. Rather, it prevented further decline in their election rates.

Second, SMDs should improve minority opinion of the council. With SMDs, white council members stopped seeking the support of the JCCC. One of the outcomes of *Yarbrough* was to prevent the election of a council with all members endorsed by the JCCC. Hence whites may look more favorably upon a council onto which white candidates were elected without the JCCC endorsement. White residents may be better represented by white councillors, or they will at least perceive themselves to be better represented. Longitudinal survey data collected for the *Birmingham News*[1] allow for partial evaluation of attitudes about local government by race.

In the surveys, voters were asked to evaluate the job the Birmingham city council was doing and the job Arrington was doing as mayor as excellent, good, fair, or poor. Over the years, race became an increasingly accurate predictor of how voters rated the city council and the mayor. The percentage of black respondents who considered the council to be doing a good or excellent job rose from 49.7% in 1981 to 64.2% in 1991. Conversely, white approval of the council declined from 46.3% in 1983 to 20.8% in 1991. The 1989 switch to SMDs did not slow the decline in evaluations of the city council offered by whites. Opinion of Mayor Arrington followed less of a trend among blacks and whites. Approval of the mayor by blacks was 53.1% in 1983 but rose significantly in later surveys. At the midpoint of Arrington's second term in office, 1985, he had the approval of nearly half of white voters. This declined with his tenure in office to 21.6% in 1991. Thus, by 1991, whites held the council and mayor in equally low esteem.

Focusing on the minority who pressed the legal challenge, I constructed five dichotomous indicators to test the linkage of race to evaluations of the council and mayor using a logit model. The categories, coded 0 and 1,

TABLE 1: Logit Analysis of City Government Evaluations

Responses	*1981*	*1983*	*1985*	*1989*	*1991*
How would you rate the job city council is doing?					
White	–0.67**	–0.05	–0.94****	–1.66****	–1.75****
High income	0.06	–0.04	–0.46	0.45	–0.47
Republican	0.21	–0.09	0.04	0.39	0.01
Male	–0.28	–0.20	0.15	–0.30	–0.10
College graduate	0.46	–0.27	0.62*	–0.24	–0.28
Constant	–0.02	0.09	0.38*	0.50**	0.67****
χ^2	15.0**	3.9	26.8****	51.7****	99.1****
% correctly predicted	57.7	53.1	60.6	66.4	72.1
N of cases	466	524	386	369	509
How would you rate the job Richard Arrington is doing as mayor?					
White	–1.95****	–1.84****	–2.40****	–2.13****	–2.96****
High income	0.15	–0.07	–0.15	0.55	–0.65*
Republican	–0.04	–0.53*	0.31	–0.61	–0.47
Male	–0.11	0.19	0.14	–0.14	0.01
College graduate	0.48	0.53*	0.36	–0.30	0.32
Constant	1.03****	0.87****	2.11****	1.79****	1.92****
χ^2	99.5****	107.7****	92.0****	106.1****	254.2****
% correctly predicted	71.3	71.3	72.2	75.6	82.3
N	471	529	392	385	532

NOTE: Excellent and good were coded 1, and fair and poor were coded 0.
*$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$, ****$p <$. 0001; two-tailed tests.

identified positively respondents who were white, had high incomes, were Republican, were college educated, and were male. The results in Table 1 show the primacy of race in shaping attitudes toward the council and mayor. Race far outweighs any other variable in predicting opinion about the quality of service the council and mayor are performing. By 1991, the race coefficient for council evaluations was three-and-one-half times the magnitude of the next largest coefficient, income, and in evaluations of the mayor, the difference was greater. The data offer modest evidence that college-educated persons view both council and mayor more favorably and that Republicans rate the mayor more negatively. None of the other indicators appears to have a significant relationship.

The equations show a strong temporal increase in racial polarization of opinion of the council and mayor. The percentage of cases correctly predicting how respondents would evaluate the council rose from 57.7 in 1981 to 72.1

in 1991. Similarly, the correctly predicted percentage on opinion of the mayor increased from 71.3 to 82.3. The linkage of race to perceptions of performance in local government was powerful and became stronger with time. Implementation of SMDs was to assure that white citizens would serve on the council. The data show that white residents do not perceive the district-elected council to be doing a better job of actual representation. In fact, they perceived the district-elected council more negatively than they did the at-large system.

Third, the *Yarbrough* decision altered candidate orientation toward greater concern with district matters. In 1989, all incumbents ran for reelection, but only five lived in districts without another incumbent. This created two open seats (Districts 2 and 4) and two seats for which incumbents faced each other (Districts 3 and 9). This election began a transition. Previously, candidates defined themselves primarily in terms of their relationship to the JCCC and Arrington. In 1989, candidates started emphasizing neighborhood ties. District 2 is white. There, the winner had lived in the area for 25 years and campaigned through neighborhood associations and door-to-door contact, highlighting her involvement with community affairs, especially fighting unwanted commercial development. Her main opponent had lived in the neighborhood 1 year and campaigned on abortion rights and environmental issues (Demmons 1989a). In District 4, which is black, three neighborhood activists sought office. The winner was serving as a neighborhood president in the district and was a retired mail carrier whose routes had been in the district, which enabled him to get to know many residents over the years (Demmons 1989c). Two black incumbents competed against each other in District 9. One who had served as a neighborhood officer prior to her election to the council narrowly defeated a man who emphasized his ability to win city contracts for minority vendors (Demmons 1989d). In District 3, which is white, a 15-year incumbent defeated a 2-year incumbent who was handicapped because he had worked as an aide to Arrington (Demmons 1989b). No white candidate sought the JCCC endorsement, and it remained neutral in Districts 4 and 9. Thus, after the election, the JCCC majority on the council dropped from 9-0 to 4-5.

In 1993, voters could look retrospectively at how well incumbents had served their districts. Two council members, both white, retired. The JCCC endorsed the six black incumbents saying that "the black council incumbents call themselves 'team players' and point proudly to Birmingham's progress under a team headed by Arrington" (Dedrick 1993c). This placed the endorsees in the position of political insiders running on their team records, but constituents also wanted to know what they had done for their districts.

Probably, the council member caught most off guard by the new delegate role was the council president, who had been reelected in 1989 with no opposition. By 1993, a waste disposal firm was constructing a transfer station in his district. His opponents argued NIMBY (not-in-my-backyard) and stirred in the charge of environmental racism. He quickly moved to join the opposition ("Voting on BFI" 1993; Williams 1993a). The district issue cost him much on election day, when he received only 53.6% of the vote. The lesson was obvious. Being a team player for the JCCC at city hall brought many rewards, but representatives from SMDs must pay attention to their constituents. Others had similar experiences. The District 7 incumbent defended the city's accomplishments in ridding the district of dilapidated properties used by drug dealers while her opponents complained the city had not done enough (Dedrick 1993b), and the District 9 incumbent responded to criticisms of inadequate service by listing three spending projects in her district with a price tag exceeding $13 million as evidence of her service to her constituents (Dedrick 1993a).

Fourth, the change to SMDs could affect electoral turnout and competition. The number of elections in Birmingham with SMDs is relatively small, and the city's historical pattern of turnout is so uneven that it may be premature to draw conclusions about the impact of SMDs. The last three at-large elections in which only council posts and not the mayor's office were contested occurred in 1977, 1981, and 1985. Turnout as a percentage of voting age population (VAP) was 20.2% in 1977, 42.1% in 1981, and 23.8% in 1985. The unusually high turnout in 1981, the midpoint of Arrington's first term, can be explained by an intensive effort to mobilize white voters to elect a council that would oppose him (Frieden 1981). It succeeded. That was the last election in which whites won all 4 of the open four-year positions on the council. Of the 15 council posts filled in those three elections, 10 were settled by runoffs. Only one incumbent was defeated.

District-level data on the two rounds of council elections with SMDs are summarized in Table 2. Turnout in SMDs was 30.4% in 1989 and 20.5% in 1993. Turnout may have been atypically high in 1989 because the ballot also contained referenda on bond issues that were strongly supported by the mayor and the JCCC. This would explain the 31.1% turnout in District 6, where the incumbent ran unopposed. Turnout decreased in all nine districts in 1993. With SMDs, fewer elections have been settled in runoffs, and incumbents have been defeated only when districting forced two incumbents to compete against each other.

Competition does not appear to have spurred turnout. In 1989, Districts 2 and 4 had open seats, and Districts 3 and 9 had two incumbents. Ordinarily,

TABLE 2: Turnout and Winning Vote Shares in District Elections, 1989 and 1993

District	*Number of Votes Cast, 1989*	*Turnout as a % of VAP[a] (Rank)*	*Vote Share of Winner[b] (Rank)*	*N of Votes Cast, 1993*	*Turnout as a % of VAP (Rank)*	*Vote Share of Winner (Rank)*	*% Change in Votes Cast*
1	8,140	31.9 (3)	93.3 (8)	4,882	19.1 (7)	36.7 (2)	–40.0
2	5,570	21.8 (8)	56.6 (3)	4,094	16.0 (9)	66.4 (8)	–26.5
3	6,667	26.1 (6)	44.2 (1)	5,192	20.3 (6)	35.1 (1)	–22.1
4	5,692	28.1 (5)	67.0 (5)	4,185	20.6 (5)	62.4 (7)	–26.5
5	5,140	25.4 (7)	79.6 (6)	4,385	21.5 (4)	60.8 (6)	–15.1
6	6,299	31.1 (4)	100.0 (9)	4,562	22.5 (3)	53.6 (4)	–27.6
7	7,066	34.9 (2)	80.2 (7)	4,670	23.0 (2)	73.6 (9)	–33.9
8	6,061	20.5 (9)	59.0 (4)	3,386	16.7 (8)	48.2 (3)	–44.1
9	7,846	38.7 (1)	53.5 (2)	5,447	58.9 (1)	26.9 (5)	–30.6

SOURCE: Turnout data were obtained from the Office of the Birmingham City Clerk.

a. VAP (voting-age population) was estimated by applying the white percentage of VAP (84.6) to the populations of Districts 1-3 and the black percentage of VAP (68.6) to the populations of Districts 4-9.

b. Vote share is for the first ballot. All candidates with less than 50% of the vote competed in a runoff. All first-place winners in the first election won their runoffs. With the exception of District 3 in 1993, turnout was lower in the runoff than in the first election.

these factors would mobilize more voters. However, as a percentage of VAP, these four districts ranked 1, 5, 6, and 8 in turnout. Similarly, in 1993, seats in Districts 1 and 3 were open, and organized opposition to the JCCC emerged in Districts 5, 6, and 8. The new group, The People's Choice, had been founded by experienced politicians, including a state senator and municipal judge (Williams 1993a, 1993b). In turnout, these five districts ranked 3, 4, 6, 7, and 8. Conditions that usually stimulate turnout did not seem to function, but neither did weak challengers depress turnout. Competitiveness can be measured as the vote share for the winning candidate, and the closeness of the vote was a function of electoral conditions. In 1989, the two districts with two incumbents ranked 1 and 2 in competitiveness. The open seats followed, ranking 3 and 5. In 1993, the two open seats ranked 1 and 2 in competitiveness, and the three districts with organized opposition to the JCCC came in 3, 4, and 6. Incumbents with weak challenger candidates received the highest vote shares. To summarize, the data show no systemic relationship between SMDs and turnout, but election outcomes become closer when two leading candidates are fairly equally matched in background and name recognition.

CHANGE TO SMDs HAS LITTLE EFFECT

The strength of analyzing the *Yarbrough* decision is also its weakness. That the minority-white plaintiffs had not faced past discrimination depoliticizes discussion of the effects of SMDs, but it raises questions about generalizing from the findings. The data show that the switch to SMDs did not improve the minority opinion of the council. The most significant change was likely the redirection of council candidates away from citywide issues to district-level concerns. This should merit further research because postindustrial cities caught in global competition for capital are pressed to pursue a developmental policy agenda emphasizing centralizing goals.

SMDs had no discernible effect on turnout, but they appeared to offer greater insulation to incumbents. Fewer council members were elected by runoff, and incumbents had larger vote shares. These conclusions are based on only two rounds of district elections. Some of the hypothesized outcomes, including greater satisfaction with local government and increased competition and turnout, may take several years to materialize. Further research will address these questions more definitively. If the long-term trend of white flight produces more minority-white cities, study of those cases would aid in separating the outcomes solely attributable to SMDs from those that stem from the identity and history of the minority candidate.

NOTES

1. The 1981, 1983 and 1985 surveys were conducted by the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa Institute for Social Research and the 1989 and 1991 surveys by Southern Opinion Research.

2. The income indicator was constructed from grouped data. High-income categories were selected to achieve a cut point that most closely had the top 20% of respondents in the high-income category. The percentages by survey year are 21.0 (1981), 19.8 (1983), 15.3 (1985), 18.0 (1989), and 20.7 (1991).

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